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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE GEARING UP FOR NOVEMBER BIOTECH CONFERENCE

REF: A. VATICAN 3584

[1](#)B. VATICAN 3917

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace Archbishop Renato Martino told visiting EB Biotech negotiator Peter Chase October 10 that the Holy See is in the final stages of planning for its November 10-11 conference on biotech foods. Although the Council for Justice and Peace will include dissenting voices such as Greenpeace in its program, Martino indicated that the majority of speakers were pro-biotech. Martino sought to downplay expectations of a Vatican statement emerging during or immediately after the conference, though we understand from our contacts that this issue is still being debated. Martino indicated that to make the case for biotech most effectively, it would be useful to have developing country farmers who have had positive experiences with transgenic crops to offer their personal testimony, and requested U.S. ideas for potential speakers who have not previously been used in high-profile USG public events. Chase pledged to provide names, which have since been forwarded to Martino's office. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Visiting EB Special Negotiator for biotech Peter Chase told Archbishop Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, October 10 that agriculture and agricultural production in developing countries had been a key focus for the U.S. over the past year and would remain so. Enabling poor people to grow their own food is the best way to address hunger and poverty, Chase observed. In this regard, the U.S. believed biotech crops offered great potential to contribute to this larger effort. Chase told Martino that the United States appreciated the way the Holy See had approached the issue of biotechnology, particularly its emphasis on exploring the science involved and willingness to maintain an open mind on the potential contribution of biotech foods. His goal in coming to Rome was to determine how we could work better together with the Holy See to move the scientific debate along and achieve a stronger international consensus on the issue.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Archbishop Martino, citing the Holy See's desire to do everything possible to eradicate poverty and hunger, reiterated the Vatican's openness to the potential of biotech foods. He said he had gone to the Sacramento conference this past summer to observe what is being done in this field of research. He pointed out that the Holy See had not yet adopted any official position in favor of or against biotech foods, though its Pontifical Science Council had indicated there is no reason why such foods should not be eaten if carefully regulated and tested. In order to arrive at a more definitive position, his Council has decided to organize a "study session" on biotech foods November 10-11 which Martino expects (though he did not say so at this meeting) will lay a foundation for a stronger Vatican position on biotech foods. To this point the Vatican has issued positive, but cautious public statements on the subject.

[1](#)4. (SBU) According to Martino, the two-day program will be divided into four parts: 1) The state of science and research, including the contribution of the Pontifical Science Council; 2) GMOs and the environment, and GMOs and health; 3) biotech foods and international trade; and 4) the ethical implications of biotech foods. Martino noted that most of the speaking participants would be pro-biotech, though they had had to add some dissenting voices such as Greenpeace for balance to enhance the credibility of the conference. He also noted that the World Food Program and FAO would be included in the program. The one area where they had not yet locked in the speakers they needed was in the area of producers and consumers -- particularly developing country farmers or researchers. Justice and Peace Undersecretary Monsignor Frank Dewane, who is coordinating the conference for Martino, requested U.S. help in identifying farmers who could speak to the value of biotech crops based on personal experience. He cautioned that these could not be the same farmers, such as T.J. Buthelezi, who had previously spoken on behalf of the U.S. Chase promised to provide some names, and subsequently passed to Embassy

some potential contacts.

15. (SBU) Monsignor James Reinert, who is taking the lead on the biotech issue within the Justice and Peace Council, told Chase that the majority of communication the Vatican received on biotech foods was negative -- especially in reaction to earlier inaccurate media reports that the Vatican had endorsed biotech foods (Ref A). He noted that the most common criticisms of GMO food are that there is already enough food in the world and thus no need for biotech products, that biotech foods will take away freedom from

developing countries, locking them into a cycle of dependence on a few multinational companies, and that agricultural biodiversity will be eroded. He also mentioned that health safety concerns continued to surface, citing a claim from Catholic bishops in the Philippines that there had been allergic reactions to BT corn there. Chase responded that these critiques can be easily refuted. He also noted that the U.S. FDA would be interested in any legitimate claims of public health problems, and promised to look into the claims in the Philippines and report back any resulting information through the Embassy.

16. (SBU) Responding to Chase's case for biotech crops, Dewane asked whether the U.S. had developed any statistics regarding productivity increases or decreases in agricultural losses in developing countries using biotech crops. He noted that such figures could prove very useful to help make the biotech case. Chase cited evidence for South Africa's cotton production, and said he would provide more information on this to the Council. He pointed out that 27 percent of all biotech crops are now grown in developing countries. Chase also noted that USAID would be hosting a three-day conference in Africa later this fall to examine biotech applications in Africa.

17. (SBU) Martino returned to the issue of developing country farmer dependence on seeds and the often-heard claim that farmers remain obliged to buy seeds because of a gene in the seeds that prevents using seed from biotech crops. While Martino understands that this is not true, he suggested that more needs to be done to publicize this and overcome misinformation. Martino also strongly urged the U.S. to drop its WTO case, suggesting that a WTO case will "work against, not for" the U.S. effort to gain acceptance of biotech foods. Chase pledged to take Martino's suggestion back to Washington, but reviewed the U.S. concerns that had prompted the case -- particularly the spread of misinformation to developing countries and the EU's failure to take a science-based approach to its regulatory decision making.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite Martino's cautions on a clear outcome emerging from the November conference, he has indicated to the Embassy that his goal is to move the Holy See gradually toward a more positive public stance. Martino, who was elevated to the position of cardinal October 21, remains our best ally on this issue within the Holy See, but will have to work carefully within the curia to bring his colleagues along. Embassy welcomes Department's suggestions on participants for the conference provided by EB, and would also appreciate clarification of the health concerns raised by the Justice and Peace officials. Chase's visit garnered positive coverage for biotech both on Vatican radio and in Italy's national Catholic daily newspaper, which ran a full-page of biotech coverage after the visit with prominent placement of Chase and his explanation of the USG's approach on the issue.

Nicholson

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